

Beauty and the Beast: Vasilii Rozanov's Aesthetic and Moral Ideal

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My ideal is tranquility, nobility, purity. How far away I am from it
Vasilii Rozanov, *Opavshie list' ia* (1913)

Of what use is a philosopher who doesn't hurt anybody's feelings?
Diogenes

Vasilii Rozanov (1856–1919), a philosopher-turned-journalist and a proto-existentialist writer, is frequently compared to the autistic, disgruntled, and acrimonious protagonist of *Notes from the Underground*. Like the Underground Man and similar Dostoevsky characters, Rozanov flaunts, in a deliberately provocative manner, his low instincts and crudely physiological appetites. In defiance of established morals, aesthetic canons, and taste, Rozanov writes pungent descriptions of his own “repugnant” physique and “sickening” manners: “Wide open protruding eyes, licking my lips—that is me. Not pretty? But what can I do?”¹ Although such a brazen subversion of the moral and beautiful is usually described as one of the idiosyncracies of Rozanov's writing, in fact he does not start an offensive against ethics and aesthetics until late in his career.²

In his early, conservative *oeuvres*, Rozanov poses as a stern moralist and haughtily assumes the right to castigate his opponents for their moral flaws. Thus, in a much-criticized article, Rozanov lambastes Leo Tolstoy's alleged lack of faith, intel-

¹In this essay, the late works of Rozanov which I use are *Uedinennoe* (St. Petersburg, 1912); *Opavshie list' ia*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1913); and *Opavshie list' ia*, vol. 2 (Petrograd, 1915). I use translations of Rozanov's *Uedinennoe* and *Opavshie list' ia*, with minor modifications to eliminate discrepancies between the original Russian and standard English, from *The Apocalypse of Our Time and Other Writings by Vasily Rozanov*, trans. Robert Payne and Nikita Romanoff (New York, 1977). All other translations from Rozanov's texts are mine. I often quote Rozanov from a recent edition of his works, *O sebe i zhizni svoei* (Moscow, 1990); and *Mysli o literature* (Moscow, 1989). The quote here is from *Opavshie list' ia* 2:8.

²Some critics simply characterize Rozanov's statements of this kind as disgusting self-explanatory confessions. See, for instance, P. Mokievskii, “Obnazhennyi novovremenets,” *Russkie zapiski*, 1915, no. 9:304–16.

lectual arrogance, and disrespect for other human beings, and admonishes the patriarch to repent while he is still alive.³ Not surprisingly, the Populist critic Nikolai Mikhailovskii pans Rozanov's article for being irreverent and cynical. Mikhailovskii writes that Rozanov only uses serious issues as a pretext for his thoughtless, unprincipled, irresponsible "babble," and he dubs Rozanov's works "philosophical pornography" because of Rozanov's preoccupation with sexuality.⁴

Other liberals similarly claim that Rozanov's harangues only reveal his ingrained immoralism. Vladimir Solov'ev, an eminent philosopher and a leading critic of his time, refuses to discuss Rozanov's articles seriously; instead, he satirizes Rozanov as "Iudushka Golovlev," an odious, hypocritical character from Shchedrin's novel.⁵ When Rozanov becomes part of a literary, religious, and philosophical coterie centered around Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, Zinaida Gippius, and Dmitrii Filosofov, his new allies and friends in private conversations criticize his immoral proclivities, bad taste, and disagreeable manners. Behind his back, Andrei Belyi calls him "plo," from "plot'" (flesh).⁶ Gippius attacks Rozanov's "anti-aesthetic" tendencies, evident in his praise for Jewish rituals such as *mikhveh*.⁷ Merezhkovskii complains, in an open letter to Nikolai Berdiaev, about Rozanov's treacherous ways, and eventually Peter Struve stigmatizes Rozanov as "a morally insane person" for writing both left-wing and right-wing articles during the Revolution of 1905.⁸

In his acclaimed trilogy and their only recently published sequel, *Mimoletnoe* (in which he takes an ultraconservative stance),⁹ Rozanov rebuffs all such accusations coming from his entrenched critics and finicky friends by proclaiming his utter disdain for both morality ("I am not yet such a scoundrel as to think of morality") and good taste ("But I prefer 'Fido' in his kennel. Because however dirty and filthy he may be, I would rather play with him. Not with you.")¹⁰ No wonder Rozanov's *Uedinennoe* caused a veritable public scandal on its publication and was subsequently banned as pornography, as if in compliance with Mikhailovskii's verdict.¹¹

Why did Rozanov's critique of morality and aesthetics so shock people as diverse as the Populist critic Mikhailovskii, the mystical philosopher Solov'ev, the Symbolists Merezhkovskii, Gippius, and Belyi, the Christian philosopher Berdiaev, the liberal economist and politician Struve, and the Marxist radical Leon Trotsky, to name just a few?¹² The overwhelmingly negative reaction apparently comes in response to Rozanov's out-and-out revolt against all forms of transcendentalism at

³Vasilii Rozanov, "Po povodu odnoi trevogi grafa L. N. Tolstogo," *Russkii vestnik*, 1895, no. 8:154–87.

⁴Nikolai Mikhailovskii, "O g. Rozanove, ego velikikh otkrytiakh, ego makhanal'nosti i filosoficheskoi pornografii," in *Poslednie sochineniia N. K. Mikhailovskogo* (St. Petersburg, 1905), 240.

⁵Vladimir Solov'ev, "Porfirii Golovlev o svobode i vere," *Vestnik Evropy*, 1894, no. 2:906–16.

⁶Andrei Belyi, *Vospominaniia ob Aleksandre Bloke* (Moscow, 1995), 146.

⁷Anton Krainii [Gippius], "Vliublennost'," *Novyi put'*, 1904, no. 3:180–92.

⁸Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, "O novom religioznom deistvii," *Voprosy zhizni* (October–November 1905): 358–76; Peter Struve, "Bol'shoi pisatel' s organicheskim porokom," *Russkaia mys'*, 1910, no. 11:138–46.

⁹*Mimoletnoe* was published for the first time in book form only in 1994 (by "Respublika" Publishers in Moscow).

¹⁰*Uedinennoe*, 76; *Opavshie list'ia* 1:124.

¹¹Gippius called *Uedinennoe* "a book that should not have been written." See Krainii [Gippius], "Literatura i literary," *Russkaia mys'*, 1912, no. 3:29–31.

¹²See Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor, 1960).

once. Rozanov's celebration of everyday life (*byt*), poignantly focused on its most disagreeable and crudely physiological aspects ("Russian life is dirty and weak, but somehow lovely"),¹³ is as much at odds with the liberal ideals of decency, order, and continuous historic progress as with the symbolists' worship of the beautiful; and it defies the Marxist utopia of a new social order run like a modern enterprise no less than Tolstoy's renunciation of marital sex as immoral.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, scholars usually take for granted the idea that Rozanov rejected morality as such. Renato Poggioli claims, for instance, that, unlike Nietzsche and Gide, Rozanov does not even deserve to be called an immoralist, for he reduced human beings to protozoa: "Rozanov is completely amoral. . . . His ethos is that of the amoeba, or of an inarticulate and invertebrate animal."¹⁵ George Kline maintains that Rozanov "subordinated morality . . . to the unique and non-recurrent existence of living individuals" and "disliked moralizing of every kind—not just the humorless asceticism of Tolstoy and the Tolstoyans but also the humorless revolutionary asceticism of the socialists."¹⁶ These interpretations, however, are at odds with numerous didactic pronouncements in *Uedinennoe* and *Opavshie list' ia*, not to mention Rozanov's moralistic orations in his earlier works. While criticizing Tolstoy's ethical theory for being too rational and doctrinaire, Rozanov eulogizes Tolstoy's moralistic stand in literature. Even Rozanov's self-proclaimed mission "to overcome Russian literature," which Anna Lisa Crone interprets as a manifestation of his ideological relativism, is a distinctly moralistic undertaking.¹⁷ Rozanov aspires "to overcome" Russian literature's fixation on the "superfluous man" in order to turn its attention to the working man, and he applauds Tolstoy for his pioneering effort to instill morals into literature: "Tolstoy . . . treated the family, the working man, fathers with respect. . . . It happened for the first time and only once in Russian literature."¹⁸

Arguing with scholars who view Rozanov as a prototypically amoral writer, Andrei Siniavskii differentiates between two Russian words—*nравstvennost'* (personal moral convictions) and *moral'* (codified moral requirements)—and then defines Rozanov as "a moral writer who stands outside of morality."¹⁹ However, this distinction seems somewhat far-fetched, for Rozanov rejects *nравstvennost'* and *moral'* in the same breath, criticizing not only abstract moral rules but also those who internalize them. He attacks theories that celebrate morality as well as those that undermine it, and claims that he has his own brand of morality and his own brand of immorality.²⁰

The moralistic masterplot in Rozanov's trilogy is linked with his frequent allusions to his wife, Varvara Butygina, whom he lovingly calls "mama," or "ma-

¹³*Opavshie list' ia* 1:173.

¹⁴See Peter Ulf Moller, *The Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoy and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s*, trans. John Kendal (Leiden, 1988), 203–7.

¹⁵Renato Poggioli, *Rozanov* (London, 1957), 45.

¹⁶George Kline, *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia* (Chicago, 1968), 60.

¹⁷Anna Lisa Crone, *Rozanov and the End of Literature* (Wurzburg, 1978), 17–19.

¹⁸*Uedinennoe*, 37–38.

¹⁹Andrei Siniavskii, "Opavshie list' ia" V. V. Rozanova (Paris, 1982), 293.

²⁰*Opavshie list' ia* 2:8.

mochka.”²¹ Rozanov's decadent acquaintances left mocking portrayals of Varvara, who had a mystical horror of the Merezhkovskii's and often warned her husband against them and their friends. Gippius pokes fun at Varvara's vulgar jealousy of her husband; Belyi describes her as “portly, with ruddy cheeks, and somehow stern,” clearly implying that she was an odd partner for a libertarian and a modernist author.²² However, Rozanov, who was of course aware of his bohemian friends' ironic attitude toward his spouse, depicts Varvara as his guardian angel and his Muse—a touching, generous, and genuinely poetic being: “For twenty years I have been living a life of continuous poetry. I am very observant even though I keep quiet about what I see. And, imagine, no day passed by without my noticing something deeply poetic in her.”²³ By elevating his plebeian, homely wife and their middle-class marriage, Rozanov satirizes the aristocratic Symbolist cult of the eternal feminine, yet in the long run he also endorses it. In Rozanov's description, Varvara is nothing like Solov'ev's Sophia or Blok's Beautiful Lady: she is an ailing and uneducated person who even makes mistakes in Russian grammar.²⁴ Yet Varvara, with her common sense and an unfailing moral instinct, can be described as a poor man's version of a neoplatonic divinity.

Eulogizing Varvara as an ideal woman, Rozanov implicitly contrasts her to his first wife, Apollinaria Suslova, who was Dostoevsky's former mistress and a prototype for his femme fatale characters. Sixteen years older than Rozanov, Apollinaria wreaked havoc in his life for many years: he married her as a student, she left him after a few years of marriage, but she refused to give him a divorce. Hence, Rozanov's second marriage was nothing but a sin in the eyes of the church and the state; Rozanov had to adopt his own children. A deeply religious person Varvara certainly detested her union with a married man. This taunting situation inspires Rozanov's attacks against the hypocrisy of a church that blesses *de jure* marriage but condemns *de facto* marriage, and influences his views on gender and sexuality.²⁵ In an apparent reference to Apollinaria, Rozanov declares in the trilogy that he always disliked “predatory” women, and in *Liudi lunnogo sveta* he claims that it is not frigid seductresses but shy and faithful women who are genuinely lascivious.²⁶

An apostle of domesticity, Rozanov designs his *Uedinennoe* and *Opavshie list'ia* as monuments to his unwed wife of twenty years (suffering at the time from a fatal illness that progressively turns her into an invalid). He also returns to Christianity and embraces morality, seemingly in compliance with his dying wife's wishes. Al-

²¹Rozanov met Varvara Butygina (nee Rudneva), a widow of a Russian Orthodox priest, in Eletsk, where he worked as a teacher of history and geography.

²²Belyi, *Vospominaniia o Bloke*, 147.

²³*Uedinennoe*, 87–88.

²⁴Rozanov celebrates even those blunders—she says “Sibirem” instead of “Sibiri'iu,” for instance (*Opavshie list'ia* 2:109)—as evidence of Mamochka's lack of concern for the mundane, and he patterns his trilogy on such liberating latitude in grammar. At the outset of *Uedinennoe*, Rozanov proclaims that he is writing for some unknown friends or for no one in particular, “Ni dlia komu” (a prototypical Mamochka mistake in cases—dative instead of genitive).

²⁵V. V. Rozanov, “O nekotorykh podrobnostiakh tserkovnogo vozzreniia na brak,” *Zapiski religiozno-filosofskikh sobranii* (St. Petersburg, 1906), 294–303.

²⁶*Opavshie list'ia* 1:287. See also V. V. Rozanov, “Liudi lunnogo sveta,” in his *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1990), 37.

though Varvara's illness was not the only reason for Rozanov's precipitous conservative turn, it certainly prodded him in that direction. In general, Varvara exercised a strong influence on her husband and even acted as his personal censor. According to Rozanov, Varvara read every morning everything that he had written during the night and then commented on the quality of his writing.²⁷ Rozanov pays tribute to this continuous ethical and religious infusion from his simple-minded, unsophisticated spouse, claiming that "whatever is noble in my works does not come from me. I only knew how to receive and implement it, like a woman. Everything belongs to a person much better than myself."²⁸

Stephen Hutchings recently characterized the dynamic of Rozanov's interaction with other people as a "circular process of the self's alienation from, domestication of, surrender to and then re-alienation from the other."²⁹ Rozanov describes his relationship with his wife and her family, however, as a progressive transformation of a recalcitrant maverick. A discovery of his wife's heartfelt intimacy and innate goodness gradually leads the writer to a moral regeneration. Although Rozanov praises solitude as a prerequisite for peace of mind and creativity and parades his indifference to others, he longs to break away from his isolation, and thus surpass the separation of the individual in general: "I hate nothing so much and I am the most determined enemy of everything that separates people, everything that prevents them from being joined together, from being united, becoming one."³⁰

By simultaneously praising isolation (hence, the title *Uedinennoe*) and declaring that he is hostile to it, Rozanov essentially proclaims a specific ethical and aesthetic stand, which he substantiates through polemics with other ethics and aesthetics. Rozanov's defiantly decadent proclamation that he is not concerned with others and writes without thinking about the reader—"Simply because I enjoy it"—is pitted against his former friends, the decadents, whose latest turn to "congregation" he deems shallow and superficial.³¹ Criticizing this effort to unite on the basis of paltry politics, Rozanov claims that people should join on a more intimate, personal level as relatives and friends. Throughout the trilogy Rozanov calls Varvara his "friend," as an ultimate recognition of their spiritual bond, and characterizes *Uedinennoe* as an attempt to connect with "the friend."³² Rozanov's solitude is inclusive (not exclusive) of his family.

Although it appears that Rozanov jettisons morality as such, he acts, in fact, as a revolutionary who employs subversive tactics in order to clear the ground for his own teachings. Such a strategy dates back to the Cynics, who exhibited their dirty

²⁷*Opavshie list' ia* 2:39.

²⁸*Uedinennoe*, 86.

²⁹Stephen C. Hutchings "Breaking the Circle of the Self: Domestication, Alienation, and the Question of Discourse Type in Rozanov's Late Writings," *Slavic Review* 52 (Winter 1993): 84.

³⁰*Opavshie list' ia* 1:347; *Uedinennoe*, 82. Rozanov's self-professed egotism and lack of concern for others is the trilogy's provocative leitmotif: "Why are you thinking of yourself all the time? Think about people." "I do not feel like it" (*Uedinennoe*, 111).

³¹*Uedinennoe*, 3. On the former decadents' attempts to overcome decadence and move on to "congregation," and their criticism of those authors who still remain decadent, see Krainii [Gippius], "Dekadentstvo i obshchestvennost'," *Literaturnyi dnevniki* (St. Petersburg, 1908), 327–46.

³²*Opavshie list' ia* 2:16.

clothes and unwashed bodies, masturbated in public places, and did everything to shock, frustrate, and antagonize their fellow citizens. The objective of this offensive behavior, however, was to prepare people for a new ethical and aesthetic ideal. Scoffing at the cult of the beautiful in their culture, the Cynics claimed that what is intrinsically moral—civic-minded, sincere, and heroic—is at the same time beautiful, and what is currently acclaimed as beautiful is, in fact, hideous.³³

Exhibiting (like the Cynics) his own immoral proclivities, Rozanov persistently builds up an ethics of empathetic communion with the other. Rozanov's stance on aesthetics is also dualistic, although it appears to be more complex. While, like the symbolists, Rozanov aspires to express the most transient and ineffable facets of being, he also wants to register the nuances of everyday life in their compelling materiality. Rozanov's programmatic declaration at the outset of *Uedinennoe*, in which he boasts of having captured the imprints of the soul and "the cobwebs of *byt'*" at the same time, suggests a reconceptualization of symbolism. Such an emphasis on materiality brings Rozanov closer to the futurists and acmeists, the critics of symbolism. No wonder Mandelstam hails Rozanov's "penchant for domesticity" and his philological love of nuances.³⁴ Like the futurists, Rozanov distrusts the enhanced expressiveness that he achieves as leading to an impasse—"It is evident that in me there is some kind of a finality of literature, of literariness; of its essence—the necessity to reflect and express. What more is there to express? Cobwebs, sighs, the very last thing that can be perceived"³⁵—and he champions literature that is populist, politically conservative, amateurish rather than professional, and overtly didactic.

While poking fun at Merezhkovskii and Gippius for their attempts to establish a "congregation," Rozanov joins other Russian symbolists in their retrograde motion from an extreme individualism and egotism to socially useful, engaged literature. He blends his Modernist cult of spontaneity and potentiality with a recognizably Russian ideal of ultimate intimacy and lack of separation. In *Mimoletnoe* Rozanov proudly announces that there are more social elements in his works than in "opera omnia" of Merezhkovskii, Gippius, and Filosofov, even though he has no interest in their "congregation."³⁶

To recover Rozanov's ideas from under the debris of his fragmented, calculatedly self-contradictory writings, one has to keep in mind that he uses a convoluted and dialectically unfolding type of discourse, in which seemingly self-explanatory declarations must be interpreted in relation to the text as a whole. Viktor Shklovskii points out that Rozanov consistently uses a special device in his trilogy: "This is how the new themes are introduced. We are given a snippet of a ready thesis without an explanation of its appearance and we do not understand what we see; then an

³³Rozanov's literary style, as a matter of fact, is quite close to the Cynical style. Ragnar Hoistad describes the latter as follows: "Such an associative method, so sensitive to external circumstances, obviously may occasion serious violations of logic. But it is equally obvious that the grace and charm of an author often derive from the free flow of his thoughts and words when he gives free rein to his ideas, narrates whatever occurs to him, and only in the last resort assembles his thought around his theme." See Ragnar Hoistad, *Cynic Hero and Cynic King* (Uppsala, 1948), 183.

³⁴Osip Mandel'shtam, "O prirode slova," in his *Proza* (Ann Arbor, 1983), 63.

³⁵*Opavshie list' ia 2:8*.

³⁶*Mimoletnoe*, 77.

unraveling ensues—as if we were given a riddle first, and then—a solution.”³⁷ Indeed, blatantly unwarranted assertions often precede Rozanov’s fragments (though they can also appear in the middle or at the end of a piece). However, such “ready theses” may not be confirmed in the process of further deliberation, but rather challenged and unexpectedly reversed.

Rozanov’s immoralistic pronouncements, often described as the gist of his writing, are in fact methodically undermined and dismantled in the trilogy. Thus, the following fragment starts with a cynical statement that is consequently negated, then restated but limited in its implications, and finally given a new and surprising twist: “What do I think of the young generation? Nothing. I don’t think of it. I do but only rarely. But I always feel sorry for them. They are orphans.”³⁸ Rozanov’s mischievous assertion that he never thinks of the young generation and has nothing to say on the subject challenges the reader as it causes a knee-jerk response: “What kind of person is Rozanov and how does he dare to expose his insensitivity with such nonchalance, as if he were proud of being callous?!”

However, Rozanov immediately admits that he does think about the young generation, as if to reassure the reader of his moral integrity, only to revoke (and, hence, reassert) his provocative opening statement: he does think about it, but “only rarely.” Then Rozanov introduces a new theme that stands in overt opposition to his previous declaration. Claiming that he always feels sorry for the young generation, Rozanov contradicts his initial assertion, abdicates his cynical stance, and presents himself in another guise. As someone who always pities the young he may well be a moralist, and not a selfish person unconcerned with others. Finally, by characterizing the young generation as “orphans,” Rozanov intimates that he has his own perspective on the subject in question and thus makes the reader look for answers in the text as a whole.

Rozanov’s dialectical method of argumentation in the trilogy comes to the fore in larger fragments that present embryonic short stories or biographical sketches that, despite their fictional form, demonstrate Rozanov’s philosophical polemics. One particularly telling episode in *Uedinennoe* starts out of the blue (like most Rozanov’s entries) with a flagrantly false confession of his overpowering aversion to his own name, Rozanov. In the course of the ensuing discussion, Rozanov dismantles his original thesis. He not only reconciles himself to his “repulsive” name but also to his miserable looks and disgusting habits.

Critics usually take at face value Rozanov’s spurious claims that he dislikes himself, his appearance, and his own name, even though Rozanov’s references to his numerous physical (and moral) flaws are manifestly ironic. More importantly, Rozanov’s irony has a specific goal; it exposes the prevailing ethical and aesthetic beliefs only to subvert and vanquish them. Rozanov’s self-portraits hark back to Gogol’s depictions of characters that are agglomerations of laughable idiosyncracies. Even though Rozanov sharply criticizes Gogol for reducing human beings to their external manifestations (and thus subverting reality itself) he resorts to Gogol’s

³⁷Viktor Shklovskii, *Rozanov* (Petrograd, 1921), 35.

³⁸*Opavshie list' ia* 1:89.

method when he describes himself in virtually the same manner as Gogol depicts characters like Akakii Akakievich. Gogol, however, has no pity for human imperfections, and suggests in his epigraph to *Revizor*: "Don't blame the mirror if you have a crooked face"; Rozanov evokes Gogolian subjects (and imitates his formal devices) in order to criticize Gogol's stance toward the world.³⁹

Rozanov commences with a curt statement—"Surprisingly repulsive to me is my name"—and goes on to substantiate this feeling with a fact that supposedly confirms it.⁴⁰ He describes taking a stroll in Petersburg and coming across a sign reading "Rozanov's German Bakery," which comes as a final blow. Rozanov jumps to the conclusion that there is something about his name that lends itself readily to a drab activity like baking but would make it look quite ridiculous on the cover of literary works. Rozanov spins his yarn masochistically: "How can anyone with a name like this embark on an intellectual career—that would be quite laughable, wouldn't it?: 'THE WORKS OF V. V. ROZANOV' do not tempt me. It even sounds ridiculous. 'POEMS BY V.V. ROZANOV' is absolutely unthinkable. Who will 'read' them? 'What do you do, Rozanov?' 'I write poems.' 'Fool! You'd do better baking bread!' Quite natural."⁴¹

Crone singles out eight narrative voices recurring in Rozanov's late works. According to this classification, the fragment in which Rozanov discusses his dislike of his own name is a sample of buffoonery. Crone views the peculiarity of the Buffoon, as compared to Rozanov's other narrative voices, in "the disjointed, unexpected conglomeration of images that this voice evokes."⁴² Such a "disjointed, unexpected conglomeration of images" is, of course, typical of Gogol's characters' picturesque, utterly improbable, unabashedly embellished discourse. Even the way in which Rozanov finds out about his infamous namesake, an owner of a bakery, is typically Gogolian—taking a stroll in Petersburg, this unpredictable city where anything can happen, he runs into a strange and transforming experience of sorts. Rozanov apparently intends to challenge Gogol's construction of the world as a place where human beings are invariably reduced to their physical attributes and habits, mannerisms, and social ranks, only to be ridiculed and rejected.⁴³ He sounds suspiciously like a Gogolian character when he first makes a parallel between his repulsive name and his looks and then concludes that his entire personality is repugnant and that, "quite naturally" (in Gogol such conclusions inferred by association always seem to be "natural" and easily convince everyone), no one would ever be fond of him.

³⁹Crone argues in her unpublished paper, "Rozanov's Gogolian Heritage and the Russian Apocalypse," that "to view Rozanov as a writer who escaped Gogol's influence is to oversimplify the interrelations between these two writers and their respective *oeuvres*" (p. 9). It is important to note, however, that despite his admiration for Gogol as a writer, Rozanov employs Gogolian devices in order to offset Gogol's deleterious impact on the world and proudly claims that he will eventually overcome Gogol (*Mimoletoe*, 116).

⁴⁰*Uedinennoe*, 28.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 29.

⁴²Crone, "Rozanov's Gogolian Heritage," 36.

⁴³Another indication that Rozanov's discussion of "repulsive" names is thoroughly ironic is that he targets his genuine foes as people with even "more shameful names" than his (*O sebe*, 725).

This unnaturally repulsive name has been bestowed on me in addition to a miserable appearance. How many times, as a schoolboy (after the boys went home), have I stood before a large mirror in the school corridor and “how many tears I shed in secret.” A red face. Unpleasant complexion, shining (not dry). Hair of a fiery color (and that in a schoolboy!), standing straight up, not in the noble hedgehog fashion (a manly style), but in a kind of rising wave, perfectly absurd. I never saw anything like it on anyone. I smeared it with grease, but it never stayed flat. Then I went home—and once again looked in the mirror, a small hand mirror: “Who could possibly like such a repulsive person?”⁴⁴

However, just as this litany ends with the seemingly irrefutable judgment that nobody could like a person with such a “repulsive” face, the author starts to contradict himself. Rozanov points out that, despite his ostensibly disgusting appearance, he was always well-liked by other students and acted as their ringleader at the most auspicious moments. The reason other students liked him, Rozanov surmises, must have been that they could see something in his face that he could not see himself, no matter how hard he looked in the mirror. He could see only the external, a mask instead of a face—exactly like Gogol when he reduced his characters to their pitiful physical attributes. In so doing Rozanov missed everything that made his face alive and genuinely attractive: “In the mirror, staring at myself til ‘my eyes started to bulge,’ I failed to observe my ‘expression,’ my ‘smile,’ how my face had a life of its own; yet I believe this very part of me was alive and made me remarkably loved by so many (as I always loved absolutely in return).”⁴⁵

In what follows, Rozanov unexpectedly broaches a more general theoretical subject. He depicts himself against the background of the Aristotelian aesthetic that describes all things as having their formal causes prodding them into being. In opposition to this authoritative theory, which gives a normative definition of literary work as harmonious, balanced (neither too big nor too small), dynamically evolving, and culminating in a final stage of cathartic consummation, Rozanov insolently presents his self-portrait. He is not well-shaped but irredeemably formless, he is not realizable but immanently subjective, and, to top it off, he is not interested at all in being objectified. Rozanov protests any attempt at finalization; hence, he prefers Dostoevsky to Gogol and Tolstoy because their works are too accomplished.⁴⁶ In this respect Rozanov’s ideas certainly foreshadow (and could have influenced) Bakhtin.⁴⁷ Rozanov claims that he himself is never consummated but always in the process of becoming, and he defies the spatial and temporal dimensions and even the natural seasons of human life by combining the wisdom of old age and the spontaneous joy of childhood: “Quite simply, I have no sense of form (Aristotle’s *causa formalis*). I

⁴⁴*Uedinennoe*, 29–30.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁶See V. V. Rozanov, *Legenda o velikom inkvizitore F. M. Dostoevskogo: Opyt kriticheskogo kommentariia* (Munich, 1970), 59.

⁴⁷Bakhtin only once dismissively mentions Rozanov’s study (while enumerating those authors who tried to monologize Dostoevsky. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problemy tvorchestva: Poetiki Dostoevskogo* (Kiev, 1994), 211. However, Bakhtin apparently appreciated Rozanov’s late dialogical writings since he advised young Moscow scholars who rediscovered him in the sixties to read Rozanov. See S. G. Bocharov, “Ob odnom razgovore i vokrug nego,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1993, no. 2:70–89.

am a 'clod,' a 'loofah.' But this is because I am all spirit, I am turned inward, the subjective is developed to an infinite extent, such as I cannot imagine in anyone else."⁴⁸

A growing realization that there can be an aesthetic other than Aristotelian eventually leads Rozanov to self-acceptance.⁴⁹ He claims that now he likes all those disheartening things about himself that as a young man he thought were so repulsive: his prosaic name, his red, shining face, and his unruly hair. He also understands that his predilection for old and shabby clothes was similarly part of his instinctive anti-aesthetic rebellion: "Yes, it pleases me now that 'Rozanov' is a disgusting name. I may add that from childhood I loved ragged, worn-out, threadbare clothes. 'New' clothes always felt tight, embarrassed me, were unbearable to me. Just like wine: the older the better. . . . I thought the same way about boots, hats, and what 'takes the place of a jacket.' And now it has all begun to please me."⁵⁰

Unlike Hegel, who defines the beautiful as a perfect correlation between an ideal content and its material, Rozanov claims that the subjective shines through no matter how imperfect its incarnation. The thesis that subjectivity as such is aesthetically superior to what is traditionally viewed as beautiful—well-sized, finely shaped, balanced, fully realized, and consummate—explains Rozanov's bizarre predilection for portraying himself as an aesthetic misfit and moral abomination and his use of disgusting details and sickening comparisons in his humorous self-characterizations.

On the whole, Rozanov abandons the traditional aesthetics of the beautiful and substitutes a new, manifestly Modernist aesthetics of "expression." Foreshadowing Surrealist poetics, Rozanov emphasizes the trivial, ugly, and nauseating in human experience and portrays himself ironically as a carrier of all such grotesque qualities. Perhaps to parody aesthetic theories, such as Solov'ev's, that equate the beautiful and moral, Rozanov claims, half-seriously, that his most repulsive and physically nauseating idiosyncrasies (which symbolize his ingrained depravity) only make him more sensitive and humane: "There is a terrible amount of nits swarming in the roots of my hair. Invisible and disgusting. From this in part comes my depth (I see the roots of things, I am humane, do not condemn, am compassionate)."⁵¹

Rozanov's paradoxical thesis that disagreeable appearance and immoral proclivities are conducive to ethical behavior is paralleled by his claim that homely but pleasing objects should be included in the aesthetic domain. Rozanov relates that he deliberately makes himself grow fond of "ugly and repulsive things" if, when viewed from a certain angle, they strike him as endearing: "Therefore, owing to a certain 'education' (by adapting myself, becoming accustomed), I was able to reach a state of affection for ugly and revolting things, provided only that they appeared to me under a 'sympathetic aspect,' with a certain 'lovely quirk.'"⁵² By contrast, Rozanov

⁴⁸*Uedinennoe*, 31.

⁴⁹In his first treatise, *O ponimanii* (1886), Rozanov is thoroughly influenced by Aristotle (Rozanov translated Aristotle's *Metaphysics* into Russian in collaboration with his colleague, P. D. Pervov, a classicist from the Elets gymnasium who did the bulk of the actual translation from the Greek).

⁵⁰*Uedinennoe*, 30–31.

⁵¹*Opavshie list'ia* 1:446.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 304–5.

proclaims his irrevocable hatred of the sublime: "Everything 'sublime' was constantly alien to me. I did not like or respect it."⁵³

Spurning the Classicist dogma that inspiration should be checked by reason and satisfy common sense and good taste (a dogma that even the Symbolists were reluctant to forsake), Rozanov glorifies bad taste and chooses spontaneity over deliberation and premeditation. However, contrary to those critics who define Rozanov's works as a celebration of unlimited and unrestrained freedom,⁵⁴ it is moral qualities such as innate goodness that Rozanov describes as his aesthetic ideal (just as the Cynics reject formal beauty to glorify the morally beautiful). Subsequently, he enters into an implicit polemic with Kant, who separates the moral and the aesthetic and reduces morality to acting in accordance with one's moral duty. Rozanov starts a long fragment on morals with a remark usually described as a proclamation of his obdurate amorality: "I am not hostile to morality, it is simply that 'it never enters my mind.' Or it peels off, when I discuss it (at someone's request). 'Rules of conduct' have no chemical affinity with my soul; and therefore nothing can be done about it."⁵⁵

The provocativeness of Rozanov's declaration stems from its sprightly tone and a purported claim to universality. It appears that Rozanov considers morality to be so irrelevant to human life that he does not even bother to be hostile to it and rejects it as such. However, Rozanov's further discussion shows that his attitude toward morality is not as negative as one would assume from his initial statement, and that he distinguishes between the following three notions: moral rules, moral duty, and moral feeling. By and large, Rozanov is opposed only to employing hard and fast moral rules as guidelines for human behavior. He rebuffs normative ethics by mocking people who are actually able to rely on such precepts in their conduct: "Besides, people 'with rules of conduct' have always been repugnant to me. They are affected and stupid and there is nothing in them. 'He hands you a crib-sheet, and when you read it, you know everything about him.'"⁵⁶

Even though Rozanov uses an emotional, overtly subjective *ad hominem* argument as both evidence and logical proof, his point is clear. If only affected, foolish, and superficial people can follow moral rules, then such rules go against the grain of human freedom and individuality. Rozanov's criticism of applied ethics is evocative of Dostoevsky's paradoxicalist's rebellion against utopian philosophies, with their annoying prescriptions for achieving happiness. Apparently targeting the Merezhkovskii's circle, Rozanov writes that people who brandish their interest in congregation exercise a deadening effect on his whole being:

"Social ideals!" they are all shouting; the emergence of the "social element in literature," the awakening of "social interest." Perhaps I understand nothing; but when I meet a person "with a social interest," it is not that I am bored or bear ill toward him, but in his company I simply die. "I become

⁵³Ibid., 508.

⁵⁴Sergei Nosov, *V. V. Rozanov: Estetika svobody* (St. Petersburg, 1993), 69.

⁵⁵*Opavshie list'ia* 1:189.

⁵⁶Ibid.

saturated" and dissolve away: I am without mind, without will, without words, without a soul. I am dead.⁵⁷

Despite his attacks against moral rules and people who readily follow them, Rozanov himself is often prone to moralize. While defending the tsar and the royal family, the army, and his friends and patrons (such as Konstantin Leont'ev and Aleksei Suvorin) from liberal and radical critics, Rozanov resorts to an egregiously moralistic discourse. Thus, Rozanov admonishes Merezhkovskii to recant his accusations against Suvorin and Grand Prince Nikolai Mikhailovich.⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, Anthon Sergl claims that Rozanov was a conservative thinker in the vein of the nineteenth-century Positivistic tradition, not a "pre-fascistic Modernist."⁵⁹ But Rozanov's political conservatism, not unlike that of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, is linked to his modernist aesthetics—a bizarre synthesis that reveals its protofascist facets in *Mimoletnoe*, in which Rozanov purports to demonstrate how the Jews overrun the Christian world. In his trilogy, though, Rozanov has not yet adopted this ultraconservative ideology (although a mounting vilification of the Jews shows that he is moving in that direction).

In the following fragment, which is often misconstrued by critics, Rozanov comes very close to prototypical Russian moralism in the vein of Tolstoy. Interestingly, in this case Rozanov even alters his usual dialectical method. Rather than beginning with a provocative statement that is then neutralized and dismantled, he starts with a moralization and saves the "dynamite" for the end. Rozanov notes that as people get old they become interested in ethics: "The slow pace of old age brings with it a loosening of attachments. And death is final coldness. Approaching old age, a man finds himself worried above all by the irregular life he has led, not in the sense that 'he did not find much enjoyment' (such a thought never enters his head), but in the sense that he failed to do what was needed."⁶⁰

This idea is overtly reminiscent of Tolstoy's typical motifs (in *Resurrection* and other works) in which characters bitterly regret spending many years of their lives in a vain pursuit of physical pleasure. Rozanov definitely makes a distinction here between a life well spent and a life wasted, claiming that people start to assess their past from the perspective of moral duty as they gradually liberate themselves from the dictates of their sensual urges.⁶¹ Rozanov summarizes his moralistic preamble with a characteristic confession that effectively validates not only moral duty but also, by implication, morality itself: "To me at least the idea of 'duty' began occur toward old age."⁶² As the fruit of old age and wisdom, the idea of moral duty is of

⁵⁷*Uedinennoe*, 135. Belyi describes Blok's negative reaction to Merezhkovskii's and Gippius's attempts "to overcome individualism" and turn to congregation (*Vospominaniia o Bloke*, 167).

⁵⁸*Mimoletnoe*, 48.

⁵⁹See Anthon Sergl, *Literarisches Ethos: Implikationen von Literarizität am Beispiel des konservativen Publizisten V. V. Rozanov* (Munich, 1994), 468.

⁶⁰*Uedinennoe*, 91.

⁶¹In the longstanding tradition of Russian moralistic writing, Rozanov praises individual good deeds and renounces sensuality as deceptive: "What is the best thing that happened in one's past life and in the distant past? A good deed, even if it is ever so small. . . . And what about those boisterous pleasures (I did not have many)—all that 'running about.' They are only momentary pleasures, and in 'later years' fade into insignificance" (*ibid.*, 115).

⁶²*Ibid.*, 91.

course quite precious. But then Rozanov leaps back and stresses again his innocence of and immunity to morals.

Previously I always lived “by my moods,” that is, by appetite, by taste, by “what I wanted” and “what I liked.” I cannot imagine even such a “lawless person” as myself. The idea of “law” as “duty” never once occurred to me. . . . I did not know what it was, and I was not sufficiently interested to learn. “Duty was invented by cruel people to oppress the weak, and only fools obey it.” Something like that. . . .⁶³

George Kline interprets the last part of this fragment as being “wholly in the spirit of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra.”⁶⁴ However, it tells a different story, even stylistically. Rozanov is making fun of Nietzsche by giving a deliberately trivial recapitulation of his ideas. Although Rozanov is quite proud of his depravity, he also laments it: “Where does this feeling come from? *From the sense of guilt*, but also from the deep and true knowledge that I have not been a good man. God gave me talent, but that is something else. The more terrible question is, *Was I a good man?*—and the answer is No.”⁶⁵ Rozanov criticizes Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, respectively, for validating immoralism and making it fashionable.⁶⁶ Finally, Rozanov’s appraisal of moral feeling becomes an enthusiastic endorsement. While acknowledging that he himself, regrettably, does not have a deeply entrenched moral instinct, Rozanov expresses admiration for those people who do. His whole trilogy is, of course, a eulogy to one such person, whom Rozanov calls “a moral genius”: “Mamochka is a moral genius. And that’s the crux of the matter.”⁶⁷

Rozanov emphatically rejects any attempt to construct morality as a rigid system of formal rules of behavior, and argues that moral education can only be attained through the immediate impact that moral individuals have on others (of course, both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky gave many examples of such moral transfiguration in their novels). Rozanov observes that his own regeneration began when he first met his wife’s relatives, amazing people who were noble and happy even though they were poor and had many sad memories: “How people may be in need of everything . . . and yet live nobly and happily, live with painful, sad, infinitely sad memories, and yet be happy for the reason that they sin against no one (envy no one), and are not guilty before anyone.”⁶⁸ Rozanov claims that an acquaintance with the Rudnev family has changed his mode of theorizing. Having abandoned Kant’s a priori method, Rozanov grounds his philosophy in the empirical.⁶⁹ However, he assesses empirical reality from

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Kline, *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought*, 61.

⁶⁵*Uedinennoe*, 40.

⁶⁶Rozanov often spoofs philosophic theories that, in his view, validate amoral proclivities. Thus, he mocks Schopenhauer’s relativism: “According to that premise I am definitely not bound to ‘ensure accuracy’ and to write history or geography correctly, but only write it ‘as I know it.’ If there had been no Schopenhauer, I might feel ashamed, but since Schopenhauer exists, ‘I am all right’” (ibid., 128). He offers a similarly ironic recapitulation of Nietzsche’s philosophy: “He is falling, let us give him a shove!” (ibid., 64).

⁶⁷*Opavshie list'ia* 2:395.

⁶⁸Ibid., 1:239.

⁶⁹In *O ponimanii*, Rozanov investigates how human consciousness structures the world through a framework of its innate categories, a distinctly Kantian endeavor.

a programmatic ethical standpoint as being “noble” or “un-noble”—the principal criteria of evaluation he uses as his new philosophical categories.⁷⁰

The word “noble,” in Rozanov’s terminology, means the opposite of petty, mean, or trivial. A noble person is an inherently virtuous person who acts morally out of a natural predisposition for good things and repulsion from bad things. Rozanov’s whole trilogy extols morality in this particular sense—as an innate, spontaneous ability to rise over circumstances, to transcend the human domain of envy, conceit, paltry passions, sinfulness, egotism, and irritation; to reach out to the other and, in the final analysis, to save the world by being a noble and beautiful person. Manifestly polemicizing with Nietzsche, who described his innate nobles as standing above the rest of mankind and being able to carry out their promises to their peers only, Rozanov emphasizes the propensity to empathize with any human being, without exception.⁷¹ His “noble” characters are able to connect even with morally impaired types like himself, or with simple people like the maid whom his wife impulsively gives a kiss, thanking her for helping their family out.⁷²

By imitating his virtuous wife Rozanov also aspires to become moral but admits that he occasionally suffers setbacks: “And you cannot sweep the ‘penny-bazaar’ out of your soul: all kinds of worry, vexation, anger, self-love—and they are all not worth a cent or a moment of time, but there they are. They are lurking there, and there is no way to stop them from entering your soul.”⁷³ Yet Rozanov stresses the transformative effect that “mamochka” has exercised on his whole personality and work. No wonder he dismisses Kant ironically while introducing his aesthetic and moral ideal in the person of his terminally ill, crippled wife of twenty years.

But then, too, surely my admiration for my “friend” consists in this: When you see a superb, “moral” person, who never bothers her head about “morality,” but who is “from God,” “from her parents,” and from eternity, whose thought is not divided, who has no mental reservations at all, and who never had an evil thought about anyone, then you turn away from the “arts and elegance”; “the critique of pure reason” falls out of your hand, and you quietly move aside in order to remain invisible and carefully watch the person who represents the very highest that can be found on earth.⁷⁴

Thus, Rozanov’s ultimate moral and aesthetic ideal lies in altruistic empathy, the gift of being able to relate intimately to other people, identify with them, share their joy, and commiserate with them out of natural inborn nobility, not because of moral duty (in contrast to Kant, Rozanov describes ethical and not aesthetic judgement as being disinterested).

Rozanov’s self-professed ethical indifference is so shocking and persuasive that it is easy to overlook (or discard as insincere) his mounting substantiation of the

⁷⁰Rozanov uses the terms “noble” and “un-noble” as primary existential and, hence, ontological characteristics. Thus, he emphasizes that human proclivity for suffering stems from the “un-noble” substratum of the world (*Opavshie list' ia* 2:340).

⁷¹See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York, 1967), 28–31.

⁷²*Opavshie list' ia* 1:190–91.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 401.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 190.

moral and aesthetic ideal. It is tempting to portray Rozanov as an immoralist, an ideological relativist, a protean and inherently paradoxical thinker, and it is not difficult to find evidence in his writings that support any of these hypotheses. Yet Rozanov comes much closer to the moralistic, soul-searching trend in Russian literature than one would assume judging by his self-deprecatory, blasphemous pronouncements.

Rozanov equally rejects Kant's and Tolstoy's rigorous moralism, on the one hand, and Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's subversion of morals, on the other. He opposes Kant's and Tolstoy's attempts to construct morality on a rational level and then decree it to mankind, but he also rebuffs Nietzsche and Schopenhauer for their immoralism that panders, in his view, to the worst human inclinations. These ongoing polemics lead Rozanov to promulgate his own ideal which is simultaneously moral and aesthetic.

In describing his wife as a natural "noble" person, Rozanov does not forget about his aesthetics of potentiality and resistance to finalization, but links it to the ethics of altruistic empathy through the notion of spontaneity. Varvara Butiagina is a spontaneously "good" person just as Vasilii Rozanov is spontaneously "amoral" (but not an "immoral" or diabolic individual, a conclusion inferred by some of Rozanov's critics).⁷⁵ In the final analysis, Rozanov's trilogy imitates the great Russian moralistic novel in which a troubled male protagonist experiences rebirth at the hands of a simple-minded beauty with a flawless moral instinct.

⁷⁵Rozanov rejects such accusations as based on a misunderstanding of his character, pointing out that he never had a demonic personality like Byron: "They [critics] had no grasp of my character. None. Sometimes [they described me] as someone like Byron, 'flying high in the sky.' Sometimes [they described me] as 'Satan,' all dark and in flames. But *none* of this is true: I am just a good-natured fellow" (ibid., 2:265).